



BOB ZIEGELBAUER

---

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • TWENTY FIFTH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT  
2005-06 Issue Summary #6  
September 13, 2006

### **“Primary Elections in Wisconsin”**

#### **Background Information:**

A common question I receive in September of even-numbered-years, “*Why may I only vote for the candidates of one party in a primary election?*”

The purpose of the September partisan primary is to select a party's nominees for the general election in November. In a partisan primary, the elector may vote on the ballot of only one political party. Frustrated voters often object that their choices are limited because they are not permitted to cast their votes for candidates of more than one party. Most states have a closed partisan primary system that requires voters to publicly declare their party affiliation before they can receive the primary ballot of that party. Wisconsin's "open primary" process, which was adopted in 1904, does not require voters to make a public declaration of their party preference. Instead, the voter is given the primary ballots of all parties but, once inside the voting booth, may select candidates on only one party's ballot.

Source: <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/LRB/Research/qanda.htm>

#### **Additional Background Information:**

September 11, 2006 article in the *Green Bay Press Gazette*,

#### **State's primary election process dates back 100 years Wisconsin is one of 14 states that has an open vote**

By Karen Lincoln Michel

MADISON — Casting a ballot in Tuesday's partisan primary requires voters to choose candidates from one party only — a tradition that goes back 100 years.

According to the state Elections Board, voters passed a statewide referendum in November 1904 that approved a 1903 law establishing the partisan primary as a nominating process for the parties.

"We use the primary to select the candidates whose names are going to appear on the ballot through the voters, rather than among a few people in a smoke-filled back room," said Kevin Kennedy, executive director of the Elections Board. "It goes back to the days when the lumber barons and railroad barons controlled the political process in this state in the 1800s."

Wisconsin is one of 14 states that has an open primary, which means voters are not required to declare which party they are voting for in order to receive a ballot. Kennedy said Wisconsin was the first state to move from a caucus system of selecting candidates to an open primary.

Five states, including Iowa, Michigan and Minnesota, narrow their candidates through an open caucus. The Wisconsin Blue Book states the purpose of Wisconsin's September partisan primary is "to select a party's nominees for the general election in November. In a partisan primary, the voter may vote on the ballot of only one political party (unlike the general election where it is possible to select any party's candidate for a particular office)."

STATE CAPITOL: P.O. BOX 8953, MADISON, WI 53708-8953 • (608) 266-0315  
TOLL FREE: 1-888-529-0025 • FAX (608)-266-0316 or (608) 282-3625 • E-MAIL: [bob.ziegelbauer@legis.state.wi.us](mailto:bob.ziegelbauer@legis.state.wi.us)  
DISTRICT: 1213 S. 8TH STREET, P.O. BOX 325, MANITOWOC, WI 54221-0325  
MANITOWOC OFFICE: (920) 684-6783 • HOME: (920) 684-4362

PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER



## BOB ZIEGELBAUER

---

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • TWENTY FIFTH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

---

Instead of disclosing one's party affiliation to polling workers, Wisconsin voters are handed either a combined ballot or five separate ballots — one for each party. Inside the voting booth, voters may cast only one party's ballot.

"The idea is that you get to make the choice in secret," Kennedy said.

Kennedy said most complaints he hears from voters is frustration over their inability to cast votes for members of different parties.

"The answer is that this isn't the election process, it's the nominating process," Kennedy said.

### **Additional Background Information:**

According to Kevin Kennedy, the Executive Director of Wisconsin's State Elections Board, Wisconsin's partisan primary process became law in 1904, following a favorable, statewide referendum vote to adopt the partisan primary process. Prior to this referendum and law change, candidates for public office were selected by the convention of delegates, eligible voters or members of the political party.

The purpose of Wisconsin's partisan primary is to nominate one candidate from each political party who will run against nominees of the other parties in the general election. The primary is part of the nomination process. In order to appear on the primary ballot, an individual must file a declaration of candidacy and nomination papers to show they have a minimum level of support. If there is more than one individual who is seeking to run for office to represent a party, the primary election will decide which individual will represent the party for the general election in November.

Under current law, voters may only vote in one party's primary election. For instance, if you choose to vote in the Republican Party primary, you may only vote for Republicans, helping the party nominate its Republican candidates for the general election. The same would be true if you choose to vote in the Democratic Party primary. You may not participate in each party.

Unlike most states, Wisconsin has an open primary. This means that voters in Wisconsin do not have to publicly declare in which party primary they will participate. We are able to make this selection and declaration, in private, at the voting booth. Most states have a closed primary in which voters are required to publicly register their party affiliation in order to receive the ballot for their party primary.

Many people who express concern with our current partisan primary process state that they would like to vote for a Republican candidate for one office and a Democrat candidate for another office. Again, under our current law, this is not possible

### **Rep. Ziegelbauer's View:**

I support an Open Primary. In proposals I have introduced and/or supported in the past would have changed Wisconsin election law to allow voters to vote for each office at a partisan primary election, but not be limited to one political party.

STATE CAPITOL: P.O. BOX 8953, MADISON, WI 53708-8953 • (608) 266-0315  
TOLL FREE: 1-888-529-0025 • FAX (608)-266-0316 or (608) 282-3625 • E-MAIL: [bob.ziegelbauer@legis.state.wi.us](mailto:bob.ziegelbauer@legis.state.wi.us)  
DISTRICT: 1213 S. 8TH STREET, P.O. BOX 325, MANITOWOC, WI 54221-0325  
MANITOWOC OFFICE: (920) 684-6783 • HOME: (920) 684-4362

PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER



## BOB ZIEGELBAUER

---

### STATE REPRESENTATIVE • TWENTY FIFTH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

We are all regularly reminded of the limits of our current closed primary system when the even-numbered year September partisan primary becomes the de facto final election for a particular local county administrative office; that is, when there are candidates from only one party on the ballot for that office at the general election.

During the September 2006 primary, Manitowoc County voters had to choose whether to vote in the Republican Primary Attorney General Race or the Democratic Primary race which included races for Attorney General, State Assembly, Sheriff, and Coroner.

This type of situation happens regularly throughout the state.

I understand that the major political parties will likely continue to oppose this bill. Elections are for the voters too, not only the political parties. This kind of change may or may not increase voter interest and turnout. However, it definitely will increase the impact of those who actually do show up to vote.

###